

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 31, 2013
Easter Day
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 10:34-38
Psalm 118:19-29
Colossians 3:1-4
Luke 24:1-10

When Connie and I were high school students back in our little hometown in Nebraska, my phone would occasionally ring, and on the other end of the line would be the Commander of the American Legion Post. He would tell me that a veteran had died, and asked me if I would attend the funeral service and play Taps at the military portion of the service at the cemetery.

At other times, the voice on the other end of the line was the head of the local VFW in our town, asking me to play the National Anthem or Taps at the annual Memorial Day service at the local cemetery.

Doing that was a great honor, but those experiences produced a lot of mixed feelings and emotions in me. I often felt that I was immersed into a reality that was much bigger than I was. On top of that, cemeteries made me very uncomfortable.

A couple of years earlier, I had stood at the grave of my classmate who was electrocuted while playing with his neighbors in their yard.

Every time I played Taps at a funeral, I saw the gravestones of people in my town who I had known. People like Mike Clyde, who lived across the street from me, and who burned to death in a car accident on New Year's Eve.

I remember the very first time I saw a gravestone with the name "Thelander" on it. That put a quiver in my liver. Cemeteries made me uncomfortable. And I began to notice that cemeteries were places where the traffic flow was always one direction. People went in – but they never came out. (I later learned that this is the reason why they put fences around cemeteries, because people are just dying to get in.)

Many years later, Connie and I moved to Wilmore, KY, to attend Asbury Seminary. We lived in a little duplex, and it was a short walk to the seminary *if you took the direct route*. Most people didn't take the direct route, because it led you right through the cemetery. I began to notice when I would pass through the cemetery that the folks who had been there on prior days and weeks were still there on that particular day. I never saw a sign on a gravestone that said, "gone fishing, back at 4:00 o'clock."

During the last few months we lived in Wilmore, I was struggling to find out what God wanted us to do next, so I would often stop in the cemetery on my way home from school and pray. I could always count on the same crowd to be there, waiting for me. We'd have prayer meeting in the cemetery.

Last summer we were back in our old hometown to visit our families. One day I went out to the cemetery. I noticed many new residents who had moved in. The dirt was still fresh on the grave of Dr. Jim Teachworth, my best buddy's father. And I passed by Wes Sumpter's place, my old high school history teacher.

And I noticed that several family members had moved in during those intervening years.

I spent a long time walking through that gated community, and as the sun began to set behind the distant corn fields, I realized something. I had walked through that entire neighborhood, and *nowhere* did I see dirt moved and piled up with an empty space where a resident once resided. I didn't have to call my mom and ask, "hey, do you know if so-and-so moved, they don't seem to be here?"

One thing I know about cemeteries. *Cemeteries are places of death, where dead people remain dead.*

But on a day long ago – a day very much like today – some beautiful, loving, compassionate women walked into a cemetery. As they did, they encountered a man who said to them: "the man you are looking for is not here."

On that day, the world was turned upside down. *Everything changed.*

We've got 50 days to absorb this, to take it in, to ponder it in our hearts. The clock starts now.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.